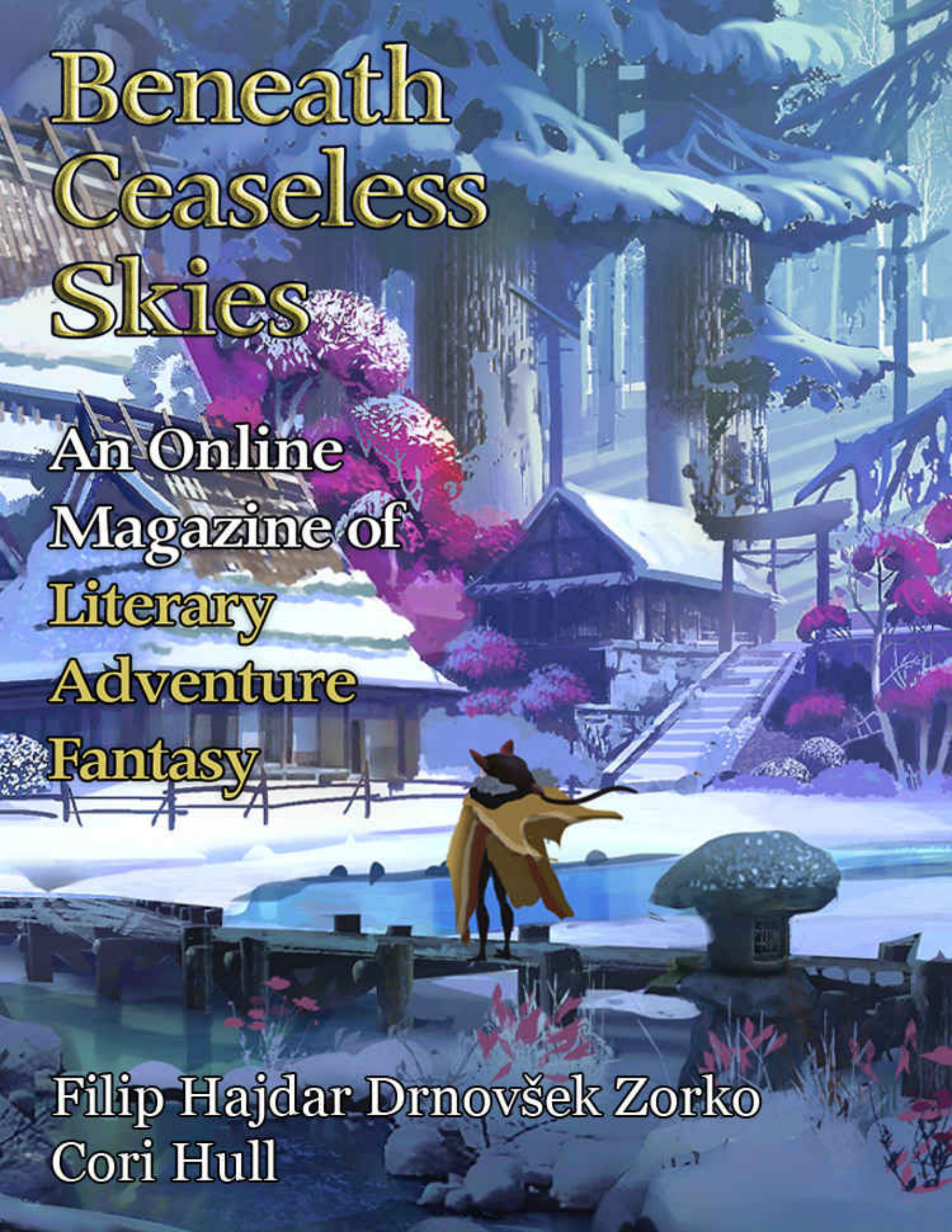
Beneath Ceaseless Skies
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“When Your Being Here is Gentler Than Your Absence Hard,” by Filip Hajdar Drnovšek Zorko

“Rose Kissed Me Today,” by Cori Hull

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WHEN YOUR BEING HERE IS GENTLER THAN YOUR ABSENCE HARD
by Filip Hajdar Drnovšek Zorko

You've lived this all before.

That's the thought that keeps me going, through the acrid sting of mage-smoke in my nostrils and the terror of almost having lost you already. There's fear on your face, too—you're only now straightening, one trembling hand clutching at your sleeve, and—and—no. I find I cannot call this woman *you*. You look older than your years, your hair streaked with silver. This woman is barely thirty. She does not have your easy calm; she flinches at the sight of the Tierran assassin pinned neatly to the floor by my sword. She is not you, and will not be for years to come.

So be it; she is Fallon Deere, First Minister to the Free State of Altorania, and you are you, the woman who sent me to her side.

"Thank you," Fallon says, and that, at least, is all you: the niceties, even when there must be questions yearning for free rein—but her voice is thinner than I'm used to, than I've heard cutting across a crowded hall or murmuring reassurance in my ear. Less assured. "Forgive me, I—I don't quite know how to treat a stranger who has saved my life."

A stranger. I swallow through uncertainty, aim for nonchalance instead. "You could start by asking her name."

Fallon's eyes widen, as if her lapse in manners were the direst part of her situation. She clears her throat of smoke. "May I have the privilege of knowing my rescuer's name?"

"Anquina Vertstrom." I grimace. My full name sounds stilted in her presence. "Quin."

My sword's blade is brittle with char and ice. It does not shatter when I pull it free of the body, and I mutter a prayer of thanks and carefully return it to its sheath. A broken blade means failure on this mission as surely as death does.

Fallon watches me throughout.

“Your guards are coming,” I add when shouts of alarm rise in the corridor. “I’d appreciate not being arrested. Or speared, come to think of it.”

The door to the House of Deputies flies open before Fallon can respond, but she’s finally in motion, stepping down from the First Minister’s dais to meet her guards, three of them, bristling and red-faced. They do not question her when she orders them to stand down, though one regards me with more than idle curiosity. I would have expected nothing less. You’ve always been good at finding the loyalty in people.

“Seal Parliament,” Fallon orders. ‘Have a physician examine the”—she stumbles over the word, rights herself, tries again—”the body. And inform the cabinet.”

“And her, Your Excellency?” It’s the suspicious guard. His spear is near twice as tall as he is and his cheeks smoother than the sharpest razor, but he speaks confidently. I try to imagine him ten years older. Do I recognize the stubborn set of his jaw, or is my imagination running ahead of me, seeking familiar faces in a place where everything is almost but not quite familiar?

“An excellent question.” Fallon’s voice wavers. Her eyes dart to the corpse again and stay there. She breathes out. I know that breath. I can imagine it on the back of my neck, letting the fear and uncertainty ebb from her. “What can I do for the woman who saved my life?”

I bow to her at the precisely appropriate angle: deep enough for my back muscles to protest one, two, three seconds, then back up. It makes her smile, and suddenly I’m grateful for all the hours you spent drilling it into me. “Give me fifteen minutes of your time. In private.”

“Your Excellency, you cannot—”

You can silence people with a look; Fallon still needs a raised hand. She looks at me, thinking. Eventually she says, “Remove your clothing. All of it.”

I can’t help but laugh, and she mistakes my memory of you, asking the same thing of me, for disbelief. It’s reassuring: a commonality between the first time I met you and the first time I met her. Something to cling to.

“You may either speak in front of my guards or strip in front of them. Savior or not, I don’t take chances. Not with Beautierre on the horizon.”

“What makes you think I’m harmless naked?” I say, replaying a conversation that hasn’t happened yet, but I’m already unbuckling my belt.

Her caution is warranted, after all—the evidence is staining the carpet an even richer red.

I fold my clothes, which are thick and padded to ward off both cold and blade, perfunctorily. My instinct is to tend to my damaged sword now, before I need it again—but I can't risk losing the chance to speak to Fallon, and I add it to the pile. I turn to face the guards, hands turned up in ostentatious emptiness. I'm comfortable in my own nudity, in front of strangers and lovers both, but being naked in front of Fallon is different. She's neither. Or both. She's in a category that my feelings don't recognize. Easier to deal with her guards.

"Satisfied?"

The guard isn't, but he nods anyway.

Fallon leads me through the door behind the dais. I've been in the cabinet room many times but never before the Battle of Visalt Valley was fought; never with the landscape that's beyond its glassless windows intact, the high-mountain meadows unburnt and the river below unspoiled. Even in peace, the valley I know bears the marks of conflict. This view is innocent. My skin stipples beneath a friendly breeze. Altorania is a small country, tucked away in the mountains like a jewel in its setting. Here—now—it is still an unimportant country. That's a strange thought.

"You're not from Altorania."

"No." It's harder than it should be to turn away from this peaceful past. Fallon is standing at the head of the cabinet table. She's holding my sword, and for a moment my heartbeat stutters—but it's most of the way sheathed, and even as I watch she lays it carefully on the table in front of her, one hand on the hilt. I wonder if she's started learning to use a sword yet.

"Who are you?"

Unasked, I pull a chair out—not at the far end of the table but not next to her either. Who am I? This is the moment my mission rests on. One chance to convince her. "I was sent to protect you."

"By who?"

"By—" But there's no good way to answer that, not yet. "Fa— Your Excellency. May I tell you a story, first?"

There are half a dozen Free States strung like beads along the Eltese mountains. I've had occasion to meet the leaders of all of them, and I know that most of them would refuse my request and demand an answer to their

question. That's how it goes with power: even when wielded well, it tends to set people in their ways.

"All right." Fallon settles back in her chair. "Tell me a story."

A beam of sunlight snags the side of Fallon's face, painting one eye gold and the other grey. My words catch in my throat. How absurd, to feel homesick less than half a mile from the house I share with you. I breathe through emotions still recalibrating for a different time and different people.

"Weeks from now, the Tierran Institute of Military Science will make a breakthrough. A new weapon. An entropy magic, a flame of cold and heat. Far more effective than anything we have."

Fallon's eyes flick to my sword, the exposed inch of blade patterned by the distinctive char-and-ice scars of the Tierran magic we stole. "Weeks from now," she repeats.

"The Tierran armies will march before the end of spring." I have to keep talking before she starts questioning what I'm telling her. "Merotania and Eldan will fall before they come close to agreeing a common defense. Eltland will hold for a month more." Half the Free States were gone before they had—will have—a chance to resist. The edge of the table is cutting a line into my bare forearm. I force myself to relax. "We hold them here. In this valley. The war turns on it. A coalition led by Grand Chancellor Fallon Deere. That's why the assassin was here, and that's why there will be more. Two more, to the best of our knowledge. That's why *I'm* here. To protect you."

Fallon sits back. She pulls the sword free of its sheath, examines its battered blade. My fingers itch with the metal-working magic that would smooth it back to pristine sharpness. "And yet," she says at length, "you have answered neither of the questions I asked. Who are you?"

"I'm—" What am I supposed to say? I've been many people. I've been the confused, uncertain young woman who, somewhere out beyond the mountains, is even now making her slow but inexorable progress towards Altorania. I've been the volunteer that woman becomes, caught up in the right cause at the right time. I've been the survivor after the war; the reluctant warrior able, at last, to put down her sword.

What I cannot tell Fallon is who I am now. I cannot tell her about the new home I make. I cannot tell her that you were the only person I could ever fight for, because you looked at war and saw only despair. That, having

set my blade down, you were the only person for whom I would pick it up again.

"Never mind," Fallon says, gesturing in the *moving on* way that anyone who has ever worked for you learns to recognize, two fingers tapping the opposite forearm. "Who sent you?"

She hasn't reacted with the kind of disbelief I expected. Perhaps she doesn't realize the implications of what I've said; perhaps I can lie to her, never mention you at all. I weigh my options. No: I know how sharp your mind is. I can guess how it must have been, even ten years earlier. I must not mistake *less experienced* for *inexperienced*. I have no doubt Fallon has made the connections; that her silence now is a test of how far I will commit to my outlandish story.

I say, "You did."

Fallon laughs, high and sharp and beautiful. "I don't know what your game is," she says, "but you picked the right person to play it with. I've studied enough temporal magic to know your claim isn't entirely out of the question. Go on, then. Prove it."

Here, I confess, my faith in you wavers. You gave me the words to say, but what verse could possibly carry such a burden of proof? What poor, obscure poet did you repackage for this task?

Nevertheless.

"When your being here is gentler than your absence hard,
I will know to meet you, and bring you all our time."

Your detractors call you childish. They say you treat your advisors like friends, your enemies like opponents in a game of cards. They do not know you. They have never seen you do what I am watching Fallon do now.

It only takes a moment. Her fingers pause in their caress of the sword hilt. She looks from me to it and back again, as if she can determine trustworthiness in the arc of my spine, the curve of my lips, the way my arms wrap around my sides, shielding my bare skin from the cold or her appraisal or both. It only takes a moment, but for her it is the right moment. This is how she leads; this is why she is First Minister. She watches and listens and laughs, and then she makes the right decision.

Presently she meets my eyes.

"Curran," Fallon calls. "Bring Quin her clothes. And convene the cabinet."

I hardly notice when the guard enters the room and deposits my clothes in front of me. All I can do is sit and wonder what it is I've told her, what hidden meaning could possibly account for the expression of wonder on her face—for the fact that, less than an hour after the first attempt on her life, Fallon Deere is smiling.

* * *

The cabinet sequester themselves for hours. For the first half hour, I'm in the room with them, but they quickly tire of my *I can't tell you that, just in case*, and I'm sent to wait in the House of Deputies—small by the standards of the larger Free States but still large enough to seat fifty—with only the guard Curran and the portraits that line the wall for company. The faces staring down at me from the Wall of Memory are long dead. Others elsewhere in the chamber are not only alive but in the cabinet room with Fallon. Some of them I know. Some have died and others fled.

It's unpleasant meeting the eyes of people whose fates I know, even if those eyes are tempera on wood; worse to imagine the Tierran standards that will soon hang from those walls, however briefly. I turn back to my sword, unsheathed across my knees, and run two fingers along its length again, just shy of the edge. Tierran entropy magic renders most swords useless, shattering them outright or making them brittle beyond repair, but my people forge their blades to resist the cold. As long as it's in one piece, I can restore it.

"You're from Sevant."

Curran—still maddeningly familiar—is watching intently as my fingers smooth away another pockmark. "Yes."

"I've read about your metal-magic," he offers. "Never seen it."

In the years to come he'll see more of it than he ever wanted. For now, I appreciate his friendliness. Altoranians have not always responded well to my people. "Maybe I can teach you."

He stiffens and straightens his spear. "You claim there's to be war."

"Yes."

"And you—you know what's going to happen?"

"I might."

"Then tell us! Tell us what will happen, so we can stop it!"

I can't concentrate on sword and conversation both. I put the blade aside and wipe char-smudged hands on my trousers. "You believe me,

then?”

“I believe Her Excellency,” he replies immediately. “She believes you.”

“Then you’ll understand why I can’t tell you. Fallon herself asked me not to.”

I feel self-conscious talking about you. Have I said your name too fondly? Or does he think I’m talking about—about her, not you?

Or perhaps I’m overthinking. All he says is, “But *why*?”

A new voice spurs us both to alertness: “In case I was wrong.”

Fallon is standing by the door to the cabinet room, arms crossed, one hand picking at the flawlessly tailored sleeve of her doublet. Her tattoo of office curves from the back of her hand to the bottom of her wrist, the mountain rose of the First Minister joined to the triple peaks of Altorania. The ink is fresh and crisp against her skin.

How long has she been listening? I should be paying attention. *Stupid.* “Don’t look like that,” she adds, a smile smoothing the tired wrinkles around her eyes. I’m not sure if she’s speaking to me or Curran. “The cabinet is caught in a spiral. I needed a break while they talk themselves out.”

“What do you mean, Your Excellency?” Curran stands parade-ground perfect, as if trying to make up for his moment of inattention. “Wrong about what?”

“The theory of temporal magic!” Fallon’s laugh is more than tinged with disbelief. “I do not believe the past can be changed. The Tierrans, evidently, do. The risk is too great. Better to plan for the five-percent chance they’re right, no? Quin cannot tell us anything for fear it might influence events to come. There,” she says as an afterthought, “that’s what I told you, isn’t it?”

Of course it is. “I— I can’t tell you that.”

“Of course it is. I know myself. I know how I think.” Fallon cocks her head to one side. The sound of chairs scraping against stone filters through the wall. “Ah—I do believe my ducks are all in a row. We’re to spend the night in the Old Royal Apartments. Tomorrow we shall abscond somewhere a little more defensible.”

* * *

No part of Parliament would stop a Tierran mage for long, but the Old Royal Apartments are better than most. We pass in silence through seven rooms arranged in a linear fashion, each with its own door, its own pair of guards, its own inventory befitting an era when opulence was measured in coffee tables and pearl-inlaid armoires.

I watch Curran maneuver centuries-old antiques into a makeshift barricade separating the second-to-last room from its neighbor. I don't tell him it will buy mere seconds, should it come to that. Seconds can be important. So can a task, when one feels powerless.

"Quin?"

Fallon is standing by the open door leading to the final room, the elegant black tailoring she'd worn earlier replaced by a simple nightgown. It should make her look younger, but it doesn't. There's a power in refusing to be cowed, in retiring to bed in soft white cotton rather than standing anxious in steel plate.

"Your Excellency?" It's not getting any easier, remembering to call her by her title.

"Sit with me?"

Against my better judgment, I follow her into the bedroom. The furniture is all different, but I remember the rest: the allegories of love and compassion painted on the ceiling, and the scorn in your voice when you said *all the virtues the old royalty never practiced*. The place opposite the bed where the flower-and-ivy wallpaper runs thin, and the gentle pressure of your fingers directing my gaze away from it and back to you. The silence while you waited for me to make up my mind. That is the memory of you that lives in me: so sure of yourself, always. Sure enough to issue an invitation and watch patiently for my reply.

"I said *sit* with me. Not hover."

I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can sit beside her in the room where I first kissed you. I try my best. "Your Excellency, I don't know that it's appropriate."

"Quin. Please?"

There's a puff of dust when I acquiesce. Her hand is rooted in the bedspread, which is a monstrous piece of embroidered green linen that's more gold thread than cloth. I hesitate. She doesn't, and that same hand is

on my wrist, turning my palm face-up, tracing the old scar from the base of my thumb to the place where it disappears beneath my sleeve.

"Do you have this one already?"

It takes me a moment to decipher her meaning. "Yes. I've had it since I left Sevant."

"Good," she whispers. "Good. That one's not my fault, then."

"Fallon. None of this is your fault."

"Oh? No one has ever died for me before."

"And no one has died for *you* yet." I wish the idea were not so contradictory.

"Be honest. Is it likely to stay that way for long?" Fallon leans forward, elbows on her knees, head down. Her fingers twitch restlessly, and I find myself wondering if that's why she grows her hair out later, to give herself something to wind and twine between them.

"Sit up," I say. "You'll hurt your back sitting like that."

That startles a laugh out of her. "Is that part of your mission here? Do I suffer from back pain, where you come from?" The humor ebbs as quickly as it flowed. "But I'm right, aren't I? How am I supposed to justify that—that *sacrifice*?"

How far should I go? Safer not to say anything at all. She doesn't *need* reassurance—I've seen where her path leads. She'll get there, one way or the other.

And yet I say, "You're the most self-assured person I know."

She smiles crookedly. "I thought you weren't supposed to tell me about the future."

"I'm not. It's already true. You trust yourself, don't you? You're the same person you were this morning. Keep trusting her."

"Maybe. But—"

"But?"

"I need you to tell me something." Her voice is thin in the way a wine glass is thin. If I strike it, it will shatter. If I wet a finger and trace its rim, the resulting note will be constant and pure. It's dangerous; there are so many questions she might ask that I'm not sure I trust myself not to answer.

"I will," I say—correctly, cordially, neither a strike nor a caress. "If I can."

“I need to know that you have a way to get back. That I didn’t maroon —” Fallon pauses. Looks at me. Her expression is so perfectly neutral I know she is concentrating on keeping it that way. Eventually, she says, “That there’s a return journey for you at the end of this.”

“It took a huge amount of effort to send me here. Even more to keep me here. When I’m done”—if she can avoid *if*, then so can I—”all I have to do is sever the magic and it will send me back. Like a spring releasing.”

Fallon exhales. “All right,” she says. “Good.”

I don’t tell her about the other uses of that magic. I don’t tell her how it can be transferred to another person who is out of time, slingshotting them back to their present against their will. I don’t tell her what would then happen to me, shorn of the anchor protecting me from this foreign *when*. I don’t tell her because I don’t know what she’s thinking, what conclusions she’s drawn from the two lines of poetry I carried from you to her. With you I have almost never felt uncertain; with her every word I say is volatile.

“What are you thinking?” Fallon is studying me, eyes wide with curiosity. There’s an openness in the way she sits, angled towards me where previously she stared ahead, arms and shoulders drawn in around herself.

What I’m thinking is, if it were you I would reply. If it were you I would ask the same question. She is not you, but perhaps—

A knock at the door; polite, insistent. Fallon makes to answer it. I wave her back, hand on the hilt of my sword, and open it myself.

“Your Excellency?” Curran blinks at me, then focuses past my shoulder. “Something’s wrong—the guards in the outer chambers should have been relieved by now.”

And that’s when I recognize him, finally, the half-light giving his features the same cast they have in the portrait of him that hangs on the busier future Wall of Memory—the portrait captioned simply *Died with Valor*.

I’m not qualified to comment on the theory of temporal magic the way you are. I can’t say if the past can be changed. But I *know* that Curran is alive in this moment, and I know that he will remain alive as long as I have a say in the matter.

“Get in,” I say, reaching for Curran’s arm. He takes a reflexive step back. “Get *in*.”

“What are you—”

“They’re here.” The Tierrans kill silently, but I imagine I can hear them all the same, wreathed in their armor of cold and heat, making easy progress through Parliament, through the gauntlet of rooms in this ridiculous suite, through guards hearing the creak of footsteps and looking up to greet their replacements, through the door that Curran is even now refusing to close behind him—

“Do as she says.” Fallon’s voice ripples with unease. Curran obeys her nonetheless.

“When they come, stay behind me.” I speak as fast as I can. I should have gone over this earlier, stupid, stupid, *stupid*. Why would they give us time to prepare? One assassin to test the defenses. Two to learn from his mistakes. “Their magic is almost invisible—watch for steam, for distortions in the air, and when you see them, *get out of the way*, I can’t block it—”

The sound of wood giving way before Tierran entropy magic is unlike anything else I’ve heard: the whoosh of flame surging across a slick of oil and the crunch of brittle rock shattering before a blow, combined in paradoxical unity, leaving nothing behind but the rush of air filling a space that had just been occupied. It takes seconds—seconds that Curran bought us with his barricade.

“The secret passage under the bed.” My mind is racing so fast I don’t stop to consider the knowledge I’m giving away. How much of Parliament did the Tierrans explore during their eventual occupation? Could they know about the passage? “If you see both assassins—*get out*. Don’t wait for me. If there’s only one...” If there’s only one, the other could be waiting in ambush.

“I’ll take my chances if I have to.” Fallon swallows hard enough I can see her throat bob. “Don’t let it come to that. Please?”

She’s afraid—I’m afraid—that the Tierrans know I’m here this time, know what to expect. While I’m still searching for the perfect thing to say to her, the door to the bedroom disintegrates in a cloud of ash and flash-frozen splinters.

I don’t have time to size up the assassin. My sword is in my hands before the debris have settled, and I spring forwards, hoping to catch the assassin by surprise. It doesn’t work; they know I’m here. They are not overconfident, as the first one was. I have the faint impression of a single

silhouette, standing well back, and then the tell-tale ripple in the air. I throw myself to the side.

Entropy magic is deceptively slow. I get clear in plenty of time to watch the languid progress of alternating streaks of super-heated and super-cooled air. The mages of Beautierre have learnt to wield it well. Instead of a broad front, there are many smaller bursts of magic, meandering through the air as if at random, like strands of razorweed swaying in the cold shallow waters of my homeland; seemingly harmless, until they brush against an uncovered arm or leg and shred the skin open.

The bedspread smolders and catches fire. A bedpost cracks and shatters outwards in a spray of frozen splinters. I don't look at Fallon, under the bed; by the time the flames could spread far enough to endanger her, I'll be dead or the assassin will, and she'll be in the tunnel. One way or another.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Curran staring. "I said get *back*!"

He ignores me. The assassin, white-clad and long-limbed, is advancing—slowly, inexorably, as if in tribute to their magic. Their attention lands on me. Curran, well-trained, takes the opportunity, steps forward, and executes a perfect spear thrust.

For a moment I let myself hope it will land, that Curran has found the one-in-a-hundred blow through the layers of cold and heat that the assassin wears like a bulky coat. He comes close. Two inches from impact, the spearpoint crumbles under the strain of rapid temperature change. Its shards impact harmlessly on the padded cloth armor protecting the assassin's chest; the haft splits, throwing Curran off-balance, and already the assassin is pivoting, the smear of their magic turned on him, and I step forward and run them through.

The surest way to kill an entropy mage is to minimize stress on the blade. The woman—I have time, now, to look and see—crumples. My sword comes free, with shivers of hot and cold playing along its length, but the strike's as clean as I've ever seen. I breathe. I almost laugh. May I always be blessed with overconfident opponents.

Then Curran says, "Quin?", and his voice is reedy and uncertain.

He's pinned between the wall and the last remnants of the assassin's magic. The hand that held his spear is mottled with frostbite and burns. He has a path clear to his left, but the flames have spread to the curtains there;

have paralyzed him in the way only the thought of jumping through fire can, and the distortions of cold in the air are feet away—

I move before my mind can remind me that I've succeeded, that I could simply leave Curran behind and follow Fallon into the dubious safety of the tunnel. I angle the sword, lunging, my vision narrowed to the shrinking space between Curran and the magic, and I can feel it through my gloves when the cold hits the blade, head-on. I let go.

Blocking entropy magic is usually a measure of last resort. The sword takes most of the cold, frost appearing as if blossoming from the steel itself, and I imagine I can hear the metal protesting, but it will hold. It impacts the ground with a muted thud through the rug, but it will hold—

The fire at the base of the curtain licks out, tasting the rug like a curious serpent. The rug is old and dry and threadbare. It gives in with a sigh and begins to burn. My sleeve begins to burn. My sword is burning. I hear it shatter under the sudden heat.

It should have survived. It would have survived if not for this fire. The fire is not playing fair.

I only blocked *most* of the magic. Some made it through.

And Curran is dead. A line of frostbite accentuates his jaw; others spread starbursts across his chest, outward symptoms of a frozen heart.

Overconfidence is a blade that cuts both ways.

And the past cannot, after all, be changed.

* * *

Fallon finds me. I consider rebuking her for not fleeing into the tunnel on her own, but it's only been a minute. It feels like longer. The air is still breathable, the smoke only beginning to accumulate beneath high molded ceilings, and there are still places to stand in relative comfort. It feels like longer because it's a minute in which I made the decision to die for her.

"Come on," Fallon says. I can barely hear her over my own thoughts. She bends down next to Curran and unbuckles his sword. When she speaks again, her voice is strained in the manner of someone for whom another person has given their life. "We have to go."

I let her guide me down through the trap door. There's a ladder cut into the shaft beneath it and after that, a tunnel sloping steeply downhill. I feel strangely calm. Fallon will live because you lived, and that means I must

die. The last assassin will find us, and I will deal with them in the only way remaining.

I can't find it in me to say so until we're outside again. It's a beautiful night; the tunnel lets out below the city, and from here the elegant spires of Parliament are only lightly marred by fire and smoke, as if some artist wished to mirror the cloud-smudged moon above. My clothing keeps me warm enough, but Fallon in her nightgown is hugging herself in the early spring night, and I wish I could put my arms around her. I wish cold were the only thing she needed protection from. But I cannot; and it is not; and there is nothing to be gained by delaying this conversation.

"We can't run," I say. "You must remain in Altorania to prepare for the war."

Fallon takes a deep breath and nods. "Then we must stop the assassin. Can you do that without your sword?"

"Yes." I put all my conviction in that one word. *Believe me. Trust me. There is nothing undue about this.*

You are not easy to fool in matters of emotion, and neither is she. "Quin? What aren't you telling me?"

I sigh. "My odds with this"—Curran's sword—"are one in a hundred. At best. It's too risky."

"But?"

"But there is another way. I can—I can transfer the temporal magic from me to the assassin. It will unravel. Fling them back into the future. All I have to do is touch them."

"Their defenses—"

"Won't stop me quickly enough to matter."

Fallon is frowning. "And—what happens to you? Will you be stuck here?"

A flare of light interrupts, from further up the road. Distant yells—the unmistakable sound of metal shattering—silence. Sound carries strangely in the high-mountain night; it's hard to judge distance. How long do we have? Fifteen minutes? Less?

"They're coming," I say before Fallon can repeat the question. "They must have known about the tunnel. Your guards did well to delay them."

"By *did well*," she says quietly, "you mean *died well*."

A beat of silence. I turn away, looking for cover. If I can make the assassin think we're still in the tunnel, it shouldn't be difficult to take them by surprise, and I'll only need a moment—

"Quin," Fallon says, and it's like I'm dreaming, running from something I know I can't outrun but I'm trying anyway, until I make the mistake of looking back at her and she says, "Quin, what happens to *you*?"

I was only trying to make it easier for her. "It's called whiplash. The Tierran scientists discovered it when they were developing their time magic. A person can't survive out of time, not without the magic protecting them, and they—"

A sound escapes me, like an animal thrashing free from the ruins of its birth. Fallon steps closer; too close for me to turn my face away, to hide the tears even now forming, to pretend that this is anything but the end. "What happens? What happens to them?"

"They stop," I whisper, "being. They stop being."

Fallon nods, once, as if having her suspicions confirmed. "I thought so," she says. "And the answer is no. I will not let that happen."

"There isn't another way! I thought I could save Curran, but I couldn't, and I know you *live*, which means I stop the assassin here, which means—"

"I know what you think it means. I'm telling you you're wrong."

"I'm not wrong. The past can't be changed, you were right—"

"*Shut up* and let me talk."

Fallon advances on me, and I can't help taking a step back, nearly tripping on a tree root before I catch myself.

"Yes, I'm right. And if you wanted the kind of leadership that looks at self-sacrifice and names it glorious, you would have gone to Merotania or Eldan. But you came to me, and you told me that *I* was the one, and fortunately for you I'm just self-absorbed enough to have believed you, but that means you must *listen* when I tell you that this—is not—the way." Her voice tightens, rage tempered by grief: "People have died for me today. I'm not naïve. I understand that people die in war. But not like this. Not if there's another way!"

"Fallon." She's beautiful, shaded by moonlight, standing confidently as if she were addressing an audience of thousands. On a day not long hence, her words will win me over. For the first time, I will see my soul reflected back at me; I will hear someone quote the platitudes of my people,

of honor and service and glory, and condemn them as I do. And I will think: if my only skills lie in combat, the least I can do is deploy them in service of a leader for whom death is never glorious. But for all the times Fallon's words have won the day for her, they can do nothing against the inexorable progress of time. "I wish you were right," I say. "I wish there were a way."

"I'm going to tell you a story," Fallon says, as if I had not interrupted. "When I was sixteen, I fell in love with a boy. I wrote wedding vows in my head. I *knew* that this was it, that I'd lucked into true love."

"We don't have time for—"

"Stop interrupting. We have time. But you've heard this part before, haven't you? I'll skip to the end. When it all came crashing down, I made a deal with myself. I would never assume again. I would take love as it came, but I wouldn't assume it would last. That's served me well so far. Better to be pleasantly surprised, don't you think?"

I've heard that before, too. Not in so many words, but in the years I've spent with you. One doesn't inhabit a relationship without learning its shape.

"Here's the part I wager I've never told you. I wrote something back then. A poem. Most of it was childish, but two lines stuck with me. I swore never to share them with another soul, not until I was sure, doubly sure, that I'd found the right person. They became a symbol for me. Sometimes I doubted I'd ever speak them. I'm glad that I do, in the end."

It takes me a moment to understand, because the first thing I feel is betrayal: betrayal that you've never told me those words, that you don't believe in us the way I do. The next thing I feel is a fool, because of course you *have*. You told me, and I passed that message on to this past version of you, and she's known, she's known this whole time, that I love you.

"Fallon—"

She smiles, quietly, like a bashful child who nonetheless takes pride in a problem solved. It's an expression I know intimately, whether the face that carries it is five years older than mine or five years younger, and the line between you and her blurs.

"It was quite clever of me, if I may compliment myself."

"It doesn't matter," I get out between rapid breaths, because suddenly she's closer—not physically, but in the way that the gravity between us changes, the way I might now construe her closeness as deliberate. "You

don't know what will happen. The fact that we end up—" Even now, I can't quite bring myself to say it. "It doesn't change anything."

"Oh, Quin, it changes everything."

"It doesn't! It just—it just makes it more painful." Why would you do this? Why would you burden yourself with the knowledge of what I mean to you now, when the only thing left for me is death? "Whiplash is still the only sure way."

"Quin," Fallon says again, sterner. "When the assassin comes, you will fight with Curran's sword, you will win, and under *no circumstances* will you sacrifice your life. Is that clear?"

"I can't beat them without—"

"You can. You can because you already have. You can because one in a hundred is not zero. Most importantly, you can because I would *not* send the woman I love on a suicide mission!"

"You don't know that—you *can't* know that—"

She closes the gap. Her hands are soft around my wrists, on my palms, a counterweight to the missing heft of my sword hilt. There's that smile on her lips, the one you wear when you've gotten all the pieces to fall into place.

"Is it true? I unite the Free States, where others fail?"

It's barely a word: "Yes."

"Then trust that I know how to bring people together. Keep them—keep *us*—together. You say I've lived this all before. Well, I know how I think. I gave myself the information I needed to come to the right decision. You will survive this day, Anquina Vertstrom, sword or no sword, and you will return to me. It cannot be otherwise."

There's love in your logic. That's your secret. That's how you win.

I close my eyes and bow my head. "I trust you."

Your hand is soft on my chin except where your nails tilt my head insistently up. Your eyes have changed—or perhaps I'm only now seeing what was always there, the same confused causality of feeling that I've been mired in since meeting this version of you. It suits you like it doesn't me.

Then you lean in, and in the split second before your lips find mine, I do not care if this is the first time you have kissed me or the ten thousandth time I have kissed you. For the moment of your hand in my hair, your

breath in my lungs, your teeth against my lips, past and present lose their meaning and we drift untouched by the flow of time. And when you pull away, when your hand moves to the back of my neck and I bury a sob in the crook of your shoulder, I find that I am no longer on the verge of being swept away.

Because that's what you do for me. You ground me. You see the pieces of my anxieties and show me the places where they are smooth, where they fit together without cutting. You, who are so much yourself that you do not hesitate to trust that the decisions you make years from now, in both love and war, will be the same decisions you'd make now.

"I'm looking forward to falling in love with you." You kiss the top of my head. "Now go. Be my knight. Protect me. Come back to me. I'll be waiting."

"Do you promise?"

"I will know to meet you," you, Fallon, murmur, your lips brushing mine in the space between breaths, "and bring you all our time."

I go, to come back to you.

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Filip Hajdar Drnovšek Zorko is a Slovenian-born writer and translator. He grew up in Slovenia, Ireland, Australia, and the UK, and currently resides just outside Portland, Maine. He understands that his name is a bit confusing, and would like you to know that "Drnovšek Zorko" is the surname. He attended Clarion West in 2019 and his work has previously appeared in Clarkesworld and Escape Pod. In his spare time he is a keen quizzer—British readers may recognise him from that one time he was on University Challenge. Follow him on Twitter @filiphdz.

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ROSE KISSED ME TODAY
by Cori Hull

It was just one kiss. Nothing significant. A brush on the cheek. One kiss could do no harm. Except... Rose kissed me today, and now I can think of nothing else.

If I had a shiny piece of amber for each time I'd been warned to stay away from Rose and her family, well, I'd be able to buy that set of ebony needles I've had my eye on, at the very least. But warnings don't come with amber, and I suppose I don't come with much sense. Rose smiled, and I could not stay away. Not from eyes so bright and shining or dimples so entrancing. She laughed, clear and sweet, and I could do naught else but follow. Down to the stream, under the trees both heavy and light with blossoms. She wore no shoes, and she danced. Leaps and twirls at the edge of the water as if she were on some festival stage.

She looked startled when she saw me, as if she didn't know I had followed. But I saw those dimples, and I knew her surprise was just an act. Then she laughed again and held out her hand. It would have been rude not to take it. She spun me around and pulled me close, so close the linen of our skirts brushed before she spun me back out. I laughed from the unexpected joy of it all, and when she pulled me close again, she did not let me go. Instead, she grabbed up my shoulders in her hands, stepped up on the tips of her toes and brushed her lips against my cheek. I gasped in surprise—and delight. Then I blinked, and with another haunting laugh she was gone.

I stayed there by the water for at least an hour, lost in a happy haze. Mama found me with a foolish grin on my face and my market basket still empty. "What's gotten into you?" she chided me, taking the basket and sending me home. I didn't tell her about Rose. I have a little sense, at least.

Rose kissed me today, just a brush on the cheek, and I've been smiling about it ever since. Mama thinks I've come down with something. She sent me to my room to rest, but who can sleep at a moment like this. I tried to knit, to lose myself in the repetition of knit, purl, knit, purl, knit. All I have to show for it are half a dozen dropped stitches and an incomplete row. I've

been curled up in the window seat, staring toward the stream, smiling like the fool I am, and all I can think is just one thing.

Will she kiss me again tomorrow?

* * *

She looked different today, somehow. Less free but more real. Her hair was bound up tight, wrapped around her head instead of flowing loose. Her clothes closer fitting, firm and solid. But, oh, those dimples were still there. The eyes still sparked with the promise of mischief. Still the same Rose, under that guise of respectability. It took so little for me to convince her I should be stolen away again.

Not to the stream, this time, but the woods, full of golden-green light and oh so many inviting shadows. The leaves smelled clean and fresh. Summer was creeping up on our corner of the world, and with it comes heat. But the woods were still cool and comfortable.

Comfortable, that is the word, isn't it? For how I feel with Rose. It shouldn't be. I shouldn't be. But oh, how I am. The whole village says she's strange, trouble. Not just her; it's her entire family they won't take to.

I should be nervous, worried even. Or cautious, perhaps. What if we're found together? What will people think? Mama won't be happy; I know that much. She's likely to stop letting me out of the house. If Rose really is trouble, then what might she try to get me to do? Something dangerous, perhaps? Something wrong, for sure. Improper.

Oh goodness, I hope she does have something improper in mind. I can scarcely wait to see what it is.

No dancing today, although the idea is appealing, with the ethereal light and the music of the breeze through the leaves. But the trees themselves are even more appealing, so we don't dance. Rose has a better idea.

We climb.

It is glorious. Modesty abandoned, we tie our skirts to free our legs so we can scramble up the nearest trunk, giggling as we challenge one another to races. Who can reach that branch first? Who can go the highest? Rose bests me by a hefty margin, but it's of no consequence. She just grins at me, all dimples and challenge, and I find myself pushing past my unease so that I might reach her.

Her grin softens from challenge to welcome when I reach her branch, and I see it is wide enough for two. She slides over so that I can rest against the trunk, and she laces her fingers through mine, and I can no longer blame the height for the racing of my heart. We can see the village from here. It looks so different from this vantage, like something out of a painting. Something unconnected from my life. All I know in this moment is her. I can't imagine wanting it any other way.

"Are you happy there?"

I glance at Rose, surprised she would break the enchanted silence. "Happy enough, I suppose," I tell her. What an odd question. But, if it's on her mind... I wonder aloud, "Are you?" She must know what they all think of her.

Her answer is a laugh, sweeter than the peal of bells. She grins again and shakes her head. One curl escapes from her bound up hair and I long to reach out, tuck it behind her ear. But I sit utterly still, unable to move, waiting for her to say more. I find myself overwhelmed with the need to know just what she's thinking.

"I'm never happy in the village," she says at last, as if understanding my need for more. She squeezes my hand, and her smile softens again. Not sad, though. Warm. "But I find my ways around it," she assures me. "I'm happy more than not."

"Oh," I say, confused but glad all the same. "That's good."

She tilts her head, looks me over, and squeezes my fingers again. "Do you think you'll spend your life here, then?"

Unasked but clear in her eyes is a second question. *Do I want to?* I rest my head against the tree trunk and look out over the village, giving both questions the serious consideration she expects. "I don't know what else I would do," I answer at last. There is a hint of a question in my statement, though. If she has a suggestion, I'm willing to hear it.

She either doesn't see the hope on my face or chooses not to. Instead she looks back at the village and lets out a sigh. "You've been gone for a while. You'll be missed." Before I can protest, she swings herself off the branch and begins to make her way down, calling up, "Come!" so that I know to follow.

I feel as if something important has passed between us, but I cannot fathom its true nature. As I make my way back to the ground, I think that

descending should be harder, slower, more arduous than the climb had been. A return to the everyday. But it's no more difficult than the ascent. Nowhere near as much fun, though.

On the ground again, Rose is there waiting. She smiles, and any somber air I'd expected for this moment is gone. Reaching out, she holds her fingers near my cheek, just over the spot where she kissed me yesterday. It takes all of the restraint I possess not to close that space between us. Even without contact, I imagine I feel a warmth at that place on my cheek, spreading out through my entire body in time with the beat of my heart. "Will I see you tomorrow?" Rose asks, her smile spreading like the warmth.

My voice is breathy, I trip over the words, but manage to say, "I should like nothing more."

"Good," she says. Her hand drops to my shoulder and she leans forward, placing a kiss on my other cheek. My breath catches and my eyes drop shut. When I open them again, she is gone. I reach up to touch my cheek, warm all over now. I feel as if I must be glowing. A matched set of kisses, she's given me. Are they meant to mark me? Am I hers now?

I think I am, whether she meant it that way or not.

* * *

I am no less blissful than I was yesterday, but at least today I manage to make it home on my own. I keep my smile hidden, a secret, just for myself.

See. I am learning. There is some sense in me after all.

Mama is still worried about me. Or *suspicious* might be a better word. Perhaps Rose really did mark me somehow. I am changed enough that Mama can see it, though she does not know the cause. After dinner she calls me to sit with her by the fire. She asks me about my day. I tell her that I walked to the woods. It is true enough, although I leave out the part about climbing trees. I can tell she would like to ask me who I walked with to the woods, but for some reason she doesn't. Maybe she knows she won't like the answer.

We fall into silence as we turn to our knitting. The click and clack of the needles fill the space left empty of conversation. I fare a little better than last night, but not much. In the quiet, my mind wanders back to the woods and to Rose's question. Will I stay all my days here in this village? I had

answered her truthfully: I do not know what else I would do. But now that the question has been asked, I cannot help but consider the possibilities.

After I ready myself for bed, I go to the window and look out, thinking the question over still. I've never been out of the village before. Never had a reason to. I press a hand to the cool glass. I know where I would want to go, if I wasn't here. "With you, Rose," I whisper into the glass, "I will go anywhere, so long as you are there, too."

* * *

On the third day I notice the true change that has begun. Or rather, it is Mama who notices, and calls it to my attention.

"Are you feeling all right, darling?" she asks, lips pursed in concern as she peers at me over the table. "Are you over warm, perhaps? You look—" she pauses, tilts her head, finishes "—flushed." But she frowns as she says it, as if she knows it is not the right word.

"I feel quite well, Mama," I assure her, smiling to mask my confusion. "I am not too warm at all."

"If you say so," she returns, dubious. "Still, perhaps you had better stay inside today."

I laugh at the suggestion. "Oh, Mama, do not be silly. It is too lovely out to be cooped up inside. The air will be fresher out there than in here, after all."

This mollifies her, I see, but only a little. "I suppose," she allows. She fixes me with a sharp look. "But if you do go out, you are to stay out of the sun, and you will not exert yourself. Is that understood?"

"Of course, Mama. I promise."

She is satisfied enough with this answer that she takes her leave to her room to ready herself for her own outing. Today she is meeting with the other mothers in the village. Those with children my age. They are plotting something, I think. Perhaps a dance, so that we might mingle in an approved setting rather than contrive ways to go off on our own. I wish them luck. I'm proof enough that a youth in search of mischief will find a way.

After she leaves, I go into her room. Our only looking glass worth the name is at her dressing table. I pull back the curtain so there is plenty of light and I peer at my reflection. I was right that "flushed" was not the word Mama wanted, but I understand why it is the one she used. My face is

brighter, somehow. There is a sheen to it. Not of oil or sweat; more of a shimmer, I would say. But it is my cheeks that draw my eye the most. They are rosy. Far more so than they have ever been on their own without the aid of embarrassment or exercise. I trace them with a curious finger. These bright spots, I think, are no coincidence. They are centered where Rose kissed me. I stare for longer than modesty can excuse, fascinated by the change. Baffled, but not displeased. She has marked me after all, in truth as much as spirit.

Whatever is going on, I am eager to learn more.

I quit Mama's room and make my own preparations to leave. I pack a lunch, with enough for two. I also pack my knitting, for something to do while I wait. It is always Rose who finds me, wherever I am. Looking for her is a futile exercise. I learned that not long after her family arrived. But she said she'd see me today, so I know she will turn up, wherever I go.

Bend the rules though I might, I do not wish to break an outright promise to Mama. I do not go far. There is a stand of trees at the end of the lane. Nothing as grand as the woods, but a pleasant place to sit. I settle in under a tree with my wool and needles, out of the sun and engaged in a relaxing activity, and I wait.

She does not keep me waiting long.

"What are you making?" she asks, dropping down to sit beside me. She peers at my knitting with intent interest.

"It's meant to be a shawl," I say, holding it up with a sigh. "Though I don't hold much hope for it at the moment. I'd do better to just unravel it and start again." I have been rather distracted of late. I throw her a sideways glance and smile to myself. Not that I wish to complain.

She pulls her knees up to her chest and rests her chin on them. "I've always thought I'd like to know how to knit," she tells me. "It seems a worthy skill of transformation." She reaches over to finger the ball of wool.

"You never learned?" I've never met a girl who wasn't taught to knit as soon as she was considered old enough to manage it. Not everyone excels at it, but it is too useful a practice not to at least try passing along.

She only smiles and shakes her head, fingers still on the wool. "There was no one to teach me."

It seems an odd comment, but I let it go. "I could teach you," I offer, thinking even Mama could not object to such an endeavor. "Oh! But not

now. I didn't bring any extra needles with me."

"I would enjoy watching you work," she says. "If it won't bother you."

"You could never bother me." I laugh, the words out of my mouth before I realize I've thought them. Rose laughs in return, and it warms me through and through. I clear my throat. "Here, I'll start over, so you can see how it's begun."

She pays close attention as I unravel the work, winding the wool back into a ball, then I make ready to cast on, explaining what I am doing as I go. We pass the rest of the morning in this way. She asks questions now and again but never when I am counting, which I appreciate. She has grasped that the counting is, as she remarks, "an important part of the process."

"I wish I had an extra pair of needles," I tell her with some regret as I tuck the shawl in progress—now much more presentable—back into my basket. "It would be good to let you try for yourself." The sun has reached its zenith, so I pull out the lunch I packed, offering her first pick of the food.

"Next time," she decrees, choosing an apple after careful consideration. She looks at it as if it is its own mystery before taking a deliberate bite from its flesh. "Oh!" Her eyes light up, and she hastens to swallow. "That is good!"

"One would think you'd never tasted an apple before," I tease her.

"Not like this," she murmurs around a mouthful of apple.

After we eat, I dawdle in packing back up. I know I should get home, but I am loath to leave Rose. She senses my hesitation, shifting so that she is sitting beside me against the tree. She slides an arm around my waist and leans her head on my shoulder. I let my eyes drift shut and take a few slow, deep breaths, relishing her nearness. Wanting to extend the moment just a little longer, I think back to yesterday and ask, "Where would you go, if not the village?"

I do not open my eyes, but I see her smile anyway, in my mind. I hear it in her voice when she answers. "There are so many places I might go. New discoveries, old haunts, empty places, and those bursting with life."

I tilt my head, trying to make sense of this. "But where would you want to go? Where would you choose?"

"Anywhere!" She laughs. "Everywhere." She is silent another moment, then says, "But if you are asking about my favorite place, well, I suppose there is one I might choose. The Emberfall."

I have never heard of this place. “Tell me about it?” I ask.

She is quiet even longer, and when at last she speaks, it is in a whisper. “I could show you, instead. If you like.”

A thrill races through me at the suggestion. “Is it far?” I whisper in return, breathing fast despite how still I’ve grown.

“Very,” she answers. Disappointed, I open my eyes to find her mouth a wry twist. But she offers me a small smile and moves so that she is kneeling in front of me. “I don’t have to take you there to show you, though.” I start to ask what she means, but she reaches out and clasps both my hands in hers, lacing our fingers together. Fixing me with serious eyes, she asks. “Would you like to see it?”

I cannot speak, so I nod.

“Close your eyes,” she tells me, shifting closer. She leans her forehead against mine, and my skin tingles at the point of contact. My cheeks warm up, not as if flushed but as if answering some call in her own skin. “Breathe with me, and listen.”

It takes little effort to match my breathing to hers. When she begins to speak, I listen, but I do not hear the words. Instead, it is as if each syllable she utters is the stroke of a brush, painting a picture on the backs of my eyelids.

There is a pool of water, surrounded by tall lush grass. It is orange instead of green, like no grass I’ve ever seen. I think if I could touch it, I would find it smooth and soft. The pool ripples, and a sound reaches my ears now. Rushing water. I look for the source and find it: a waterfall, perhaps thrice as tall as myself. The water seems to sing as it pours off the brink and falls to the pool below. But when it reaches its destination, it does not crash or roar; it sighs, as if in relief, and flows in smooth ripples away. I can see now that there is a stream on the opposite side of the pool, carrying away these contented waters.

As I watch, the sun crests the edge of the waterfall. The light reaches the water, and I feel my breath catch as it reflects off the orange grass, filling in the ripples of the pool. It looks like nothing so much as the embers of a hearth, warm and inviting.

Movement catches my eyes and I see her. My Rose, dancing at the water’s edge, as we did together not so very long ago. Her hair is down again, a wild array of curls that swing and bounce as she spins. A memory,

perhaps? Has she found some way to share her own experience with me so vividly that it feels as if I am there? I long to join her, but without being told, I know that I am not here. I am an observer only.

Her clothing is also like nothing I've seen before. Loose and sheer, draped upon her body in a manner that covers but does not conceal. Something sharp and hungry awakens in my center, and in reality, I clench my fingers around hers, wanting more than I ever have.

Rose gasps, and the illusion vanishes. I hastily loosen my grip and drop my head, afraid to look her in the eye lest she know my thoughts. She gives my fingers a gentle squeeze but does not let go, and says, voice low, "My family is leaving the village."

I snap my head up. "When?"

"In two days," she says, holding my gaze. "We will not be coming back. But—" she draws a slow breath, and there is a hint of anxiousness in her next words "—I am allowed to bring someone with me, if they choose to join us."

"Me?" I ask, unable to believe the offer.

She nods. "I had hoped it would be you," she says, now shy for the first time since I have known her. "From the moment we met. But I didn't know if—" She hesitates. "It will change you, if you join us. Even if you decide to come back here, they won't see you as you were. It wouldn't be the same." She sits back, watching me, waiting.

"I would have to leave everything. Everyone." It is not a question, but she nods as if in answer.

I don't know if I can do that. Mama. What would it do to her? But I look at Rose again, and my heart yearns.

"Think it over," she says after a few moments of silence. "I will understand if you choose to stay. But I will need to know tomorrow." She lets go of my hands and stands, leaning over to kiss the top of my head.

I sit under the tree for a long time after she is gone, trying to figure out what I want.

* * *

"Oh, there you are," Mama says when I slip into the kitchen, still thinking. "Supper will be soon, go wash up."

She doesn't even look up from the carrot she is slicing. Her concern of this morning is long-since forgotten. I'd feared she would be worried to

come home and find me still gone. But she has not even noticed my absence, it seems. She hums to herself as she works, the melody of a dance tune.

What will it do to her? If I vanish without a trace, will she be heartbroken? Can I do that to her? My breath hitches as I wash my hands in the basin and splash water on my face. What will it do to me, though, if I stay? I've seen the Emberfall now. I've seen the promise of a world I've never dared to imagine, outside of this village. To be with Rose is enough reason to consider leaving. Though the thought had never entered my mind before she asked; I cannot pretend otherwise. But to be shown how much *more* is out there, and to know I could go there with *her*... Can I remain behind, left only to imagine it and never see for myself? Can I let Rose leave, knowing I'll never see her again, for the rest of my days? The twist of pain in my stomach is answer enough.

I've made up my mind, then.

This village is no longer enough for me. Now that I know that, the only thing to hold me here is Mama, and, love her though I do, that is not enough. She's lived her life here without complaint. It's my turn now, and I cannot take the same path she followed.

"Forgive me, Mama," I whisper. I wish I could tell her I was going, explain why. I know better than that, though. She will be hurt either way. Better not to give her a chance to stop me.

Dinner is quiet. Mama continues to hum, lost in her thoughts. I take everything in, cataloging all of the details I wish to remember when I am gone. I should speak to her, engage her in conversation, relish the time with her I have left. But this comfortable silence seems right, so I leave it be.

As I ready myself for bed, I am startled by a glimpse of light in the windowpane. There is no moon out tonight. I approach the glass to investigate. It grows larger with every step I take. Even so, it takes me longer than it should to realize that the source of light is me. I squint at my reflection, puzzled. But no, it is no mistake. My face is glowing. Actually glowing—giving off a soft light like a distant star. I take a few steps backward and then forward just to be sure, but I am certain. I pull aside the neck of my sleeping gown, and in the dim blur of the reflection I can see that the light stops at my throat. I hold up my hands, but they are just ordinary, not luminescent.

It will change you. Is this what Rose meant, then? I touch my face in wonder. What is it I will become? Does my Rose glow like this? A light in the dark by which I might guide my steps? I smile at the thought. I should be surprised, terrified even, but I'm not. I have always known she was different. That was what pulled me to her, even as it drove the rest of the village away. Maybe that is what pulled her to me, too.

* * *

"My face glows now," I say to Rose by way of a greeting the next day when she finds me in the square. It is not an accusation, just a statement. An invitation for explanation, perhaps. I keep my voice low. There is no one near, but we are not as alone as in our previous encounters.

Rose nods, eyes wide and solemn, but a hint of a smile plays across her lips. "My fault," she agrees. "It will fade, with time. A few days. A week at most."

"Will it fade if I go with you?"

She cocks her head, and her eyes sparkle with momentary triumph. "Have you decided, then?"

I meet her eyes and will my voice to be steady. "I want to go with you," I whisper, "but I need to know—" I stop, glance around. No one seems to be watching us or trying to listen, but that doesn't mean they aren't. "I need to know whatever you can tell me, about what I'm getting myself into. I have made up my mind," I hurry to assure her, "it is just—"

"Of course," she says, her voice soft and warm. I meet her eyes and yes, there is understanding there. "To come with us you must become like us. The change is easy, and quick." She takes a step closer, pretending to look at something in my basket, and whispers, "It only takes a kiss. A proper one, I mean." She glances up, holding my eyes. "But it cannot be undone, and it must be welcomed. I cannot bestow the gift on one who is unwilling."

I look down, knowing my face is scarlet. Oh, I am not unwilling in the least. "I see," I manage to say. "But what, what exactly, are you, then? Are you not—" I clear my throat, lower my voice— "are you not human?"

Her answer for me is a chuckle. She reaches out, tips up my chin with a finger. "I am something else," she says. "Something more. You will not grow old, or die. You will have the rest of eternity to see and experience, and learn."

The rest of eternity. I swallow, staring at her, trying to wrap my mind around her words. It is a concept almost too large to grasp, but I cannot deny its appeal. She offers me the gift of time, and the chance to seek knowledge. It is a precious gift. Yet there is one I would value even more. “Will I be with you for all that time?”

Her smile takes over her face, brighter than the sun. She nods. “We would be bonded, if you allow the transformation. We can see the worlds together.”

I let out a sigh of relief and offer her a smile in return. I glance around the square again. A few days ago, this place was all I knew, and all I could imagine. But now I know that there is so much more out there, and I can’t comprehend staying here a moment longer. “When do we leave?”

“In the morning,” she tells me. “Leave your window open tonight. I will come for you before dawn. You may bring any belongings you can carry, if you wish to remember this place.”

I nod. “They’ll think you stole me.”

She laughs. “Is that what I’m doing? Stealing you?”

“No.” I laugh as well. “I suppose I am running away. Still. They will think it.”

“I know,” she says, a hint of sadness in her voice. “It is why we do not revisit places where someone joined us. Not until it has been long enough for everyone to have forgotten. They are happy here. They do not understand.” She gives me a knowing look, and I nod.

* * *

I leave a note for Mama, folded on my bed where she’ll find it in the morning after I do not come down. “I love you,” it says. “I will remember you, always. Do not fret for me. Your life is here. It always has been, but I know now that mine never was.” I want to tell her more, to give something in the way of explanation, but those are all the words I can find. They won’t do at all to comfort her, but they are all I can offer.

I pack very little. What I can carry, Rose said. What I want in order to remember: a sweater Mama made me last winter, a blanket my grandmother quilted for my parents when they were wed, the necklace my father gave me before he passed, my two favorite books. It seems like so little, yet I know it will keep this place, and the people I loved here, alive in my heart.

I pack it all in my knitting basket, along with as much wool as I can fit. I am sure I will find wool in my travels, but I don't know when, or if it will be the same. Besides, Rose said she'd like to knit. Now I have all of eternity to teach her. I fold the quilt carefully and lay it atop the basket, through the hoops of the handles.

I should sleep, I tell myself, but I do not. I sit on the bed and stare out the window, waiting. My stomach rumbles and I frown to myself. "Perhaps I should pack some food," I think aloud.

"There will be plenty to eat along the way," Rose says, suddenly in my window, "though I won't complain if you bring some apples." She's crouched on the sill like a sprite from the stories. Well, she has come to take me away from my home. Maybe she's not so far off from a sprite, after all. I beam at her as she climbs, quiet as a cat, into the room. She crosses the distance between us and takes my hand. "Are you ready?" Then, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I tell her, in answer to both questions. I clasp her other hand.

"I am so glad," she whispers, stepping even closer. She leans in and presses her lips to mine.

I gasp and then lean into the kiss, my fingers twisting with hers. A slow, delicious warmth spreads through me from her, like honey spilled from a jar, flowing into and over and around me.

"Oh," I say, stepping back and trying to catch my breath. She watches me closely and I smile, grin really, to reassure her I am fine. I feel awake, aware in a way I never have. I can see the air. See the colors in the room despite the low light. I can taste the moonlight—it's cool and crisp, like peppermint. "This is amazing."

"It's only the beginning," she promises with a laugh. I catch sight of her dimples before she leans in to steal another quick kiss. "Shall we go?"

I nod and pick up my basket, then turn out the lamp. In the darkness I can see that she glows, every bit of skin a pale glimmer in the darkness. I hold up my arm and see that it glows too. I can't recall ever feeling so excited! I know I've made the right choice. "Show me the worlds," I say, and I lead the way to the window.

I am leaving behind a good life for nothing but the unknown. But I am content in a way I have never been before.

Rose kissed me today, and everything changed.

And I have her promise that she will be with me tomorrow.

Together we climb out the window and dance across the moonlit grass, into a future ripe with possibility.

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